

**CAN WE HELP FIGHT
CULTURAL ILLITERACY?**

An amateur astronomy magazine I read has a column very much like "Dialogue." Called "Focal Point," it "invites contributions from readers who wish to comment on contemporary issues in astronomy and space science." Recently it published a plea for better science education by Robert M. Hazen and James Trefil, professors at George Mason University. They are very concerned that Americans lack a basic literacy in science. They defined such literacy as "the ability to cope easily with the components of public issues that involve science," and they expressed the reason for their apprehension in this way: "From the greenhouse effect to the space station, we are constantly confronted with decisions that involve science and technology. And we should expect more of the same in the future. Every American will need a basic grounding in the sciences to make informed judgements about these kinds of issues" ("Astronomical Literacy," *Sky and Telescope*, vol. 81, no. 4, p. 348).

The same concern can readily be applied to most Americans' general knowledge of societies in Africa, or nearly anywhere else in that vast space sometimes called the Third World. And in fact we should be concerned, because there is a great deal at stake as we head toward the next millennium. From serious disease and health hazards to pollution and ecological trouble zones, distribution of wealth and resources, applications of technology, and growing numbers of refugees and victims of all kinds of oppression, we can already inventory immense problems that will only grow much larger as the world continues to grow smaller, unless the better-off portions of the world begin to do more about it. To actually understand these problems and then address them, we must first know as much as we can about the people intertwined with them. The events in the Persian Gulf make that all too clear.

Just how profound is this general ignorance? I think it is shockingly profound. The peoples frequently labeled Other occupy odd and insidious haunts in the imaginations of far too many Americans. And, in spite of the genuine effort that many primary schools are now making to inform young people, so little credible information is presented to counter the enormity of misinformation most people harbor that the problem could endure with tenacity for some time. An immediate index of this is the ease with which reputable news institutions feel free to portray the complex struggles in so many African nations as the "legacy of tribalism." On the other hand, a good many events in Africa, such as the recent change of leadership in Mali, get so little coverage in the news that one might almost think that nothing at all was happening there.



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Closer to home but no less unfortunate is the continued neglect of African art history by the College Art Association, or the pathetic lack of understanding that far too many historians of Western art constantly manifest toward the arts of Africa. There is much grist for this mill in the essays and commentaries delivered at the symposium that accompanied the opening of the National Museum of African Art on September 16, 1987 (*African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline*, published by the Museum in 1990). E. H. Gombrich's astonishing notions, as noted by John Pemberton (pp. 137-38), are only one of the best-known examples of how damaging and sad ignorance can be. Henry Drewal's references (pp. 31-32) to appraisals by John Picton and Huguette Van Geluwe of how African art studies fare in Europe are very gloomy, and Suzanne Blier's review (pp. 91-107) of the American situation is dismal. While Mikelle Smith Omari (p. 121) sounds a more optimistic note when she points out that fifteen of the nineteen California State University campuses offer African art courses, I would feel more reassured to know that the contents of those courses reflect our best efforts at understanding African arts, societies, and individuals.

My own experience in the four years since that symposium does not lead me to believe that things are much better now. This is not news, but it remains a phenomenon to marvel at. In general, if we African-art historians

knew as little about our colleagues' specializations as most of them know about ours, they would surely consider us parochial and poorly trained in the extreme. Yet from the nature and aims of African imagery to the complex social and historical situations that animate them, most scholars of Western art seem mostly in the dark and completely uninterested in an area of art that evidently strikes them as ahistorical, unschooled, and simple minded.

The double irony is that when they hear about African nations and people in the press or popular media, they imagine themselves all too frequently confirmed in their bizarre beliefs about and lack of interest in Africa. Thus we are faced with the near Herculean task of convincing them that what they learn from the representations of current events is very often as ill founded and incomplete as what they learn from the representations in so many art survey books. (I have Gombrich's *The Story of Art* [1984] before me now). This double irony is a double spiral of misinformation that grows more oppressive with each new telling. And it certainly compounds the problems that Africanist teachers and curators face.

Old and young alike are afflicted with this ignorance. Many students at Indiana University enter my introductory classes on African art and culture believing, for example, that thieves in Africa have their hands cut off, that people live in huts, not homes, and that everyone lives in fear of masks, magic, and

that great big unfathomable world out there. These students are by no means unintelligent. They just have never been in an environment where credible information about African people was either valued or available. They are amazed to learn of the ancient empires and trade networks, the herbal medicines and metal technologies, the subtle social and spiritual conceptualizations, the artistry and aesthetics—all of those things that make African societies rich, complex, and decidedly worthy of attention.

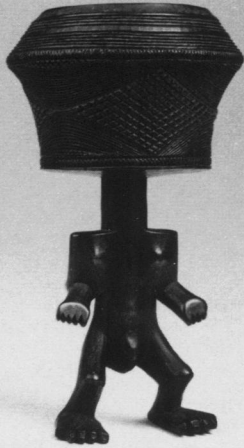
The significance of so much ignorance about a whole continent is striking. It becomes a kind of license for complacency. And it becomes a barrier for the kinds of contemplation and concern that are important at every level of a nation's citizenry when its business people, elected representatives, and huge numbers of government-agency employees are in the process of establishing and enacting policies that can have a dramatic effect on those poorly understood societies, as well as on the rest of the world. An idea of the complexity of government decision-making can be gained from the articles by Larry W. Bowman ("Government Officials, Academics, and the Process of Formulating U. S. National Security Policy," pp. 5-20) and Michael Bratton ("Academic Analysis and the U. S. Economic Assistance Policy on Africa," pp. 21-37) in the Winter 1990 issue of the African Studies Association publication *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*. An idea of the

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Those who teach, curate exhibitions, and do research on the arts of Africa are in important positions to help improve America's cultural literacy. At a most basic level, the cultural and historical information that is so much a part of the art, and therefore so critical to a reasonable understanding of it, is just the kind of information those Indiana University students are so surprised to learn of when they take African art courses. And when we offer courses that focus on special themes and issues (the use of films in the study of art history, African art in Western museums, African art in Western thought, African and modern Western art compared, are classes I have taught, for example), we are in even stronger positions to expand students' understanding of the rest of the world, and themselves.

Museum curators are often wonderfully situated to further cultural literacy, and they are doing so with more and more frequency and sophistication. Let me cite two examples. Kate Ezra's exhibition and catalogue, *A Human Ideal in African Art: Bamana Figurative Sculpture* (1990), showed Washington, D.C., and New York City audiences that for Mande people art is supposed to occasion contemplation, and that aesthetics are strongly linked to many of the Bamana's most profound ideas. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim's more recent exhibition and catalogue, *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire* (1990), have shown audiences at the same venues the inaccuracies of focusing on single ethnic

groups; they demonstrate not only the ways Europeans have fabricated African realities, but also the enterprising responses many Africans have made to those fabrications.

This is not simply commendable scholarship in its own right. It is also the kind of well-organized and interesting presentation of information that ultimately can help make Americans more aware of the nature of the rest of the world, and more aware of their misconceptions about it. From classrooms to exhibition halls, I think we need much more of this.

I would hate to think that the minds of human beings are so configured that intellectual development is not possible. Science and technology, after all, do seem to be moving along, and the thinking in Africanist academic fields—anthropology, art history, folklore, and history, for example—does appear to be growing increasingly subtle, increasingly introspective, and increasingly capable of adopting broader perspectives.

Yet an odd dislocation has occurred in our society, a society that so loudly proclaims the values of education. Africanist scholars have moved to new levels of understanding, but most citizens have not. In 1964 Godfrey Lienhardt published *Social Anthropology*, a sketch of anthropology's historical development that recalls the unsavory foundations of our disciplines. Discussing the mid-nineteenth-century, he states (p. 6):

...there began to be proposed a managerial Science of Man, more ambitious than had been contemplated by earlier ethnologists. This science, which then began to be called "anthropology," would aim at the immediate discovery of universal "laws" of human development and human nature, as certain in their application as those of the physical sciences. Once these laws were known, they were to be used for regulating human affairs, particularly those of the non-European peoples in their relations with European rulers.

As the field unfolded there arose a "progressive" school of anthropology (Lienhardt's word and punctuation), which championed the idea that a range of social and intellectual

importance attached to understanding both the decision-making and African societies can be gleaned from Robert Lacville's July 28, 1991, column in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* ("Breeze of Politics is Refreshing Africa," p. 23), especially where he discusses aid to Sudan. Just as all Americans should have a basic grounding in the science and technology issues that affect the world, so too all Americans should have a basic understanding of the societies that compose Africa and the rest of that Other world, a cultural literacy that allows them to formulate reasonable opinions and be better apprised of the social, political, and economic issues that affect our planet.

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evolution could be discerned in the living peoples of the world, and which of course merely adopted Europe's prevailing social and moral standards as the categories by which all these peoples would be judged (pp. 8–10).

Scholars recognize the self-serving political nature of this *scholarly progression*, and imagine that the fields of humanistic study have moved well beyond it. Surely the recent emphasis on reflexivity demonstrates that. Thus Johannes Fabian could write in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983, pp. 111–12): "When modern anthropology began to construct its Other...its intent was above all, but at least also, to construct ordered Space and Time—a cosmos—for Western society to inhabit, rather than 'understanding other cultures,' its ostensible vocation." V. Y. Mudimbe ("African Art as a Question Mark," *African Studies Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 3–4) and Paula Ben-Amos ("African Visual Arts from a Social Perspective," *African Studies Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 1–53) make exactly this kind of point with reference to the study of African visual expression. In fact Lienhardt, an early exponent of the virtues of professional self-reflection, emphatically highlighted the odious nature of scholarship's earlier endeavors with phrases such as "managerial Science" and "regulating human affairs, particularly those of the non-European peoples."

But as the various Africanist professions have worked to expose and rid themselves of these ideologies of bigotry and greed, a good many of the components of those ideologies—the very things that Lienhardt, Fabian, and so many others discuss—have remained lodged in the minds of large segments of the populace. Thus, in spite of these efforts, cultural illiteracy remains as sad a fact of life for many as does the visual illiteracy that museum curators often complain about (e.g., see Keith Christiansen, "Visual Illiteracy Is Threatening Art History and Art," *The Art Newspaper*, no. 6, March 1991). Certainly there has been improvement. But obviously there is still a long way to go.

There are many excellent reasons for us to be interested in the arts of Africa, and even the ones that tend to isolate us in ivory-tower environs have their merit. But these days shouldn't we also make as many contributions as we can to the elimination of cultural illiteracy, even if it seems a near impossible task? Should we not, for example, finally assemble an introductory text that dwells with convincing impact on all those sad but still marauding misconceptions, those gross and misleading simplifications (tribe, fetish, magic, traditional vs. modern, etc.), that continue to percolate through the minds and media of America? Shouldn't we find more ways to infiltrate permanent museum installations with information that asserts the sophistication, complexity, dynamism and artistry that characterize African societies? I think we should.

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